TERROIR: A FRENCH CONVERSATION WITH
A TRANSNATIONAL FUTURE

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Most people who love France seem to love it because during a visit they ate
something better than they have ever eaten before. Maybe it was the dessert
sorbet on the prix-fixe menu or the banal steak-frites at the corner brasserie or
the flaky pastry from the boulangerie across from the hotel. Recalling his first
French meal North American author Adam Gopnik writes: “It was so much
better than anything I had ever eaten that I nearly wept” (Gopnik 148). One of
the most completely reliable pleasures of France is the food.

Why does France hold such a stellar culinary reputation? One answer may
lie in the nation’s embrace of terroir. As you travel down any major roadway in
France, it would be hard to miss the triumph of terroir, and its contribution to
France’s reputation for culinary excellence. Signs displaying produits du terroir or
enticing drivers to stop in yet another small town for a unique taste of the local
culinary specialty are ubiquitous. Within France (and Europe, more generally),
terroir has a gastronomic dimension as part of a rich patrimony of regional
culinary traditions. Food seems to reflect an order locked in the French
landscape and coaxed to reveal itself through Gallic savoir faire.

Terroir is a powerful cultural concept that cannot be easily translated into
English. While the term has come to be used to discuss the taste of varied
products with links to place, its first articulations centered on French wine,
where traditionally terroir is understood as the holistic combination of soil,
climate, topography, and the “soul” of the cultivator (Wilson). A closer
examination of terroir reveals a cultural history involving more than a peasant
tending a patch of soil but rather many peasants in many locations, all invested in
shared social meanings and practices. Our understanding of the importance of unique natural and cultural attributes to the taste of wine is rooted in conversations between French vigneron that started over a century ago. It was a conversation that later brought in key state agencies and actors in the earlier 20th century, ultimately leading to the creation of the Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée (AOC) system and the establishment of the Institut National des Appellations d’Origine (INAO), which now protects not only wines but other foods and drinks as well. Although at first glance the creation of a national government bureaucracy that essentially regulates terroir may seem to signal the end of local or regional control, terroir, as well as the appellations that protect it, resulted from a localized and collective conversation that, in many ways, is on-going. The social life of terroir has never been static. For over one hundred years the French conversation around terroir and taste has ebbed and flowed and never followed a specific script.

While terroir now has transnational importance, its articulation in terms of food culture began within France, bringing in many voices to create what Yves Gilbert has termed “l’imaginaire sociale” (Gilbert). By the beginning of the twentieth century, the “social imaginary” (defined as an assembly of systems of representations, references, and values of a society) centered around le territoire. Social bonds were given material form through the local agricultural products and specialties with the unique taste of terroir. Terroir was at the heart of not only a local “social imaginary” as the carrier of memory, history, and culture, but also became a component of the larger “imagined community” of France. As the food chain increasingly appeared as an industrialized commodity chain, products of the varied terroirs offered authenticity, a retour aux sources. Many of these claims to authenticity are products of what Hobsbawm and Ranger have called “invented traditions” (Hobsbawm and Ranger). The authentication regimes—such as the AOC system—arose in the same period as nations, such as France, were inventing their own traditions. The French system of wine appellations, in this way, institutionalized the notion of terroir as part of the patrie and gave expression to a set of cultural beliefs about the historic and geographic relationship between the nation and rural agrarian life.

Given the importance of World War I to the society, economy, and culture of France, it is perhaps not surprising that the conversation about terroir was amplified at the end of the war. With some of the bloodiest battles fought among the pulverized remains of France’s most prestigious vines, the soil of the vineyards became hallowed ground, and wine itself, according to a November 1918 edition of L’Écho des Tranchées, an essential elixir for the final French victory (Garrier). Men marched home to their villages and farms, scarred perhaps, but with fond memories of the singular joys of savoring Camembert and the much anticipated arrival of wine rations (Boisard). What they discovered at home was a new economic reality where international flows of food and increased competition from the “New World” and colonial agriculture challenged local
and regional agriculture production. Economic crisis merged with a sense that a way of life (genre de vie) at the heart of Frenchness was slipping away. Pétain and the Vichy regime would later capitalize on these sentiments to evoke support for their program of restoring the true France through a retour à la terre.

In those critical years before Vichy, however, there was a very different vision of a retour à la terre. Radicals, socialists, and reformers in the 1920s and 1930s articulated a vision of a retour à la terre as a rural renaissance through regional economic revival that would become the basis for a new democratic world order where peace would be assured (Claflin). Writers and gastronomes, such as Curnonsky and Austin de Croze, offered a similar vision through their best-selling works that drew attention to France’s provincial gastronomic treasures and promoted terroir as part of a fraternal vocabulary of taste. Artists returned to regional themes in visual culture to capture the internal truths of la terre. Art critics praised representations that “are real types, French, local even, and native to a region” (Thomson). All of this was complimented by the famous touring guides put out by Michelin. Tourists were directed to discover the taste of place and the “vie gastronomique” of France’s regions. Multiple voices brought a broad public into the world of regional products and cuisines. We might view this as a culmination of a period of cultural consumption of local space that had, in many ways, begun during the Belle Epoque and created a surge of interest in local cuisines and gastronomic specialties, particularly cheese and wine (Csergo).

A new vocabulary of taste, largely adopted from the world of French wine, developed around terroir. Those whose savoir faire was vital to French viticulture sought to articulate the elements that determined distinctive wine-style characteristics. In those same years that Curnonsky was hailing the virtues of regional cuisine and tourists were rambling across the French countryside in search of local specialties, grape growers and wine producers were locked in a heated debate about the relationship of soil and grapes, essential elements of terroir, to the taste of the finished wine. The discussion was as intense as it was urgent. With the emergence of a global marketplace for wine, the French wine industry found itself in direct competition with imitators from abroad, who sought to profit from the French reputation for excellence by using local and regional wine appellations to denote a generic product untethered by place. Economic interests merged with cultural concerns about the loss of the diverse collective identities at the heart of Frenchness. One result was an extended conversation, first begun in the Champagne region but quickly joined by other wine regions, about the collective value of local foodways and the elements, both material and social, that created distinctive tastes. The Jacobin centralization of the early Third Republic had left the regional identities centered on wines, foods, and a taste of place largely untouched. But now a greater challenge appeared in the guise of an impersonal, homogenizing global capitalism.
Such a challenge required marshalling resources beyond those found in the French countryside. The Appellation d’origine contrôlée (AOC) concept emerged from these regional conversations and always served to certify and protect the collective patrimony, believed to be rooted in soil and history, connected with place and transcending time, offering a genuine experience of France. The beginnings of the AOC system can be traced back to the collective efforts of agricultural groups, particularly vigneron, appealing to the French state to protect unique French products from international competition (Guy). Champagne was awarded the first delimitation in 1908. The “Champagne region” was identified and mapped, and only wines produced in that area could be sold with the label “Champagne.” By the 1930s, conversations about terroir engaged the French preoccupations with the nation’s patrimoine but the tenor shifted from descriptions to claims about the unique tastes of place. In 1935 the law was amended to take questions of quality into account and the result was the creation of a new regulatory agency within the French Ministry of Agriculture (INAO), which was responsible for overseeing all aspects of establishing, monitoring and promoting wines awarded AOC status. As Joseph Capus, agronomist, member of the French Senate and first director of the INAO, wrote in the 1940s, “Viticulture understood [before any others] the importance of collective organization in order to understand specific aspects of production, to research, maintain and promote quality, and also to protect and promote these products to consumers” (Trubek, “The Taste of Place”).

Even though the idea of linking the concept of terroir to the protections of the state emerged in a certain historical moment, the relevance of this connection remains. The discourse of terroir is now central to French (and increasingly, European) agricultural policy concerning quality, tradition, and local development. As Elizabeth Barham notes, although the notion of terroir is deeply rooted in French history and culture, the idea of terroir also reflects “a conscious and active social construction of the present... to recover and revalorize elements of the rural past to be used in asserting a new vision of the rural future” (Barham). Terroir frames French agricultural policies that aim to protect rural landscapes and agrarian traditions. In addition, France’s continued embrace of terroir is strategic, as French producers increasingly compete with America and northern Europe to sell goods based on quality and tradition rather than price and scale.

Although oversight is centralized through the French Ministry of Agriculture, in fact the AOC system allows for considerable flexibility in how terroir is interpreted and put into practice. An INAO representative at one of the regional office explained the strength of the system:

We have shown that as long as we allow the producers to deliberate among themselves, that they have come up with plans that are stricter and more dedicated, and that are closer to technical reality, than if it had been politicians who had discussed it. (Bowen, “Interviews”)
It is this flexibility and adaptability, combined with such strong institutional support from the French state, that has made the AOC system so successful.

Comté cheese, produced in eastern France and the highest-volume AOC cheese in France, exemplifies the way that *terroir* can be used strategically by farmers and local producers. The producers in the Comté *filière* believe, as do many cheesemakers, that the cows’ pasture-based diet (which can include as many as 160 different species of plants and flowers in the Comté region) is the central element that translates *terroir*. In other words, as one Comté *fromager* explained, the *terroir* “…is what the cow eats” (Bowen, “Interviews”). Over the years, the Comté farmers, cheesemakers, and *affineurs* have continually revised the *cahier des charges*, or production specifications, with an explicit intention of protecting the link between the *terroir* of particular micro-regions and the taste of the cheeses produced there. Most significantly, in 1998, a rule was passed that limited the “dairy basin” for each small cheese producer to within a 25 kilometer radius. This rule not only protects the link between the properties of the natural environment and the flavors present in the milk, it also protects the small farmers and cheese producers in the face of increased concentration and the gradual encroachment of transnational dairy firms like Lactalis and Entremont. In the Comté case *terroir* is an evolving concept, mobilized by the producers, that has had positive consequences for both the taste of the cheese and the viability of the region.

As is the case in any dialogue where the cultural and economic stakes are high, conclusions do not always involve consensus. *Terroir* is translated into action in varied ways depending on the commitment to place and the dossier of shared practices. For example, when an AOC food or drink lacks a strong collective organization of producers, a different conversation can ensue. Cantal cheese, the second largest AOC cheese in France, has not exemplified such a sustained commitment to *terroir* over time, and due to less strict standards there has been substantial concentration of cheese producers, scaling-up and standardization among dairy farmers, and a substantial decline in the number of farms in the Cantal region (Barjolle and Sylvander). In 2007, in response to a push from the INAO, Cantal producers finally revised their 20-year old *cahier des charges*. The more precise rules led to an increase in the price of milk and the perceived quality of Cantal; in the long-term, producers and governmental officials hope that the new rules will prevent further concentration in the supply chain and contribute to a greater commitment to quality and authenticity among farmers and cheesemakers. A representative of the *Maison du Lait* described Cantal as an emerging success story, explaining,

Cantal is a super product, very original... But during a period of time, there was no one to fight for the product... A product will collapse if there are not people there to defend it. And so Cantal is an interesting example,
because Cantal became a product that was completely standard ("banalisé"), and now they are in the process of creating a product that distinguishes itself. It is the people; it is the new generation who decided to fight for the product. (Bowen, "Interviews")

A dynamic engagement of people, landscape and practice will continue to shape terroir in the future, a future that looks to involve a much larger territory than the national boundaries of France. "We have the past but you have the future," stated a sixtyish Comté cheesemaker in the course of a conversation about the craft of making cheese (Trubek, "Interviews"). The growing interest in farmstead cheesemaking by young people in the United States came up, whereas in France on the other hand, the younger generation is not as eager to become farmers or cheesemakers. As he put it, "young people today just want to work in offices and play video games" (Trubek, "Interviews").

The future of terroir requires the same social bonds instrumental to its use in the past, but what if the predictions of the Comté cheesemaker are accurate and fewer French engage with the social life of terroir? And what will be the impact of the increasing influence of multinational firms like Lactalis and Entremont on the development of shared practices? An example is the 2007 "Camembert war." Lactalis, the world's biggest cheese maker, and the Isigny-Sainte-Mère, a huge dairy cooperative, petitioned the INAO to require that AOC Camembert de Normandie be produced with pasteurized milk (Sciolino and Samuel). Lactalis and Isigny-Sainte-Mère claimed that the risks of working with raw milk were too great; Camembert traditionalists responded that pasteurizing the milk would threaten the connection to terroir and specific tastes that made Camembert so unique (ibid.). In addition, working with raw milk is significantly safer for smaller producers, who know where the milk comes from and benefit from improved traceability. In March 2008, the syndicate for the Camembert de Normandie GI voted to preserve the raw milk requirement, and the INAO committee formed to monitor the revision process was expected to officially uphold the vote (Samuel). Although Lactalis decided to continue to produce Camembert with pasteurized milk without using the benefits of the AOC label, the Camembert de Normandie AOC will remain a raw-milk cheese. Thus, a dialogue occurred, even as cultural and economic pressures continue to change the terms of the debate.

Collective challenges to the relationship of food artisans to the natural environment, to cultural traditions, and to the global food system clearly lie ahead in France. The task ahead lies in navigating the precedents of the past with the realities of the moment. When considering the future of terroir, what will stay, what elements will be transformed, and what will disappear? Pursuing and promoting terroir as part of a collective social process seems vital. Although many outside of France identify environment and culture as paramount to
understanding terroir, moving from idea to action requires a shared savoir-faire understood here as more than the knowledge of practices (how to make a certain type of cheese), but also the communal commitment to identifying as a group with the savoir-faire, the region, and the food or drink.

If terroir matters due to the collective will of artisans, be it vigneron, cheesemakers, chefs or others, the cooperative future of terroir certainly depends on support from the French state. The AOC label uses collectively shared savoir-faire as a core principle. As Marion Zalay, director of the INAO (which oversees the AOC quality label) states, “I really fight against the idea that it [is] a dusty system or very static system. ...the application for recognition, modification of the basic rules...is a responsibility and remains the entire responsibility of the human group that holds it” (Trubek, “Interviews”). In fact, according to Zalay, the link to terroir “is very important to finding the resulting quality of the product” but validating this connection is secondary in the official process of being awarded the Ministry of Agriculture’s place based label of quality; of primary importance is the “[social body] which is made of actors in the system or producers or representatives of the industry” (Trubek, “Interviews”). In this sense, the contemporary and possible future use of terroir in France when it comes to protecting France’s artisanal and/or traditional products will continue to be linked to local savoir-faire. The methods of proof, however, will be different than those used by the vigneron in Champagne one hundred years ago. Once a group has defined their savoir-faire and created a dossier to be submitted to the INAO for approval, Zalay does not rely solely on the producers who argue for their unique terroir but also brings in sensory scientists, geologists, historians and others to confirm their claims. Thus what might be understood as an indigenous discourse on terroir is no longer the final word; in this case present and future practice reflects but does not mimic the past.

Collective opportunities to imagine terroir in new locales and in new forms, however, might create a future beyond the primarily nationalist rhetoric and rationale of terroir common until today. The AOC label now functions as part of a larger network of European Union efforts to protect small scale traditional food and drink practices now bundled under the term Protected Denomination of Origin (or PDO). Zalay, in her work as the director of the French INAO, consults with groups all over the world interested in using the model of geographical indications for specific products. On a recent trip to Vermont, Zalay and the agriculture attaché of the French Consulate spoke of the renewed emphasis by the French state to small-scale, artisanal food practices. The attaché argued that this approach reflected contemporary French agricultural strategy given France’s declining ability to compete with countries like Brazil and China. France is losing farms overall but gaining farms involved in making food and drink part of the AOC and other quality label initiatives. Although becoming stewards of terroir does not exclusively
define French agricultural policy, clearly France has accepted the shifting national and global agrarian and culinary landscapes, championing place-based foods at home and abroad.

The French system of appellations (AOC), a system that initially embraced terroir as part of the patrie, developed alongside this set of beliefs about the historic and geographic relationship between the nation and rural, agrarian life. Always central to the French conception of terroir was the notion that place was ultimately critical to quality, and that such quality emerged from the shared practices producers committed to preserving the connection to terroir in practice along with the support of a strong state. What makes the AOC system both politically feasible and operationally effective are the claims of terroir—the link between the natural environment, the traditional practices and culture that have evolved in these places, and the specific tastes and flavors of the foods produced there. However, the foundation of this system has always been the collective belief in terroir.

The future of terroir, including farmstead cheesemaking in France or the United States, will require an engagement of collective beliefs and practices with the realities of a globalized food system, be it new trade embargoes, shifts in rural labor markets, or a far-flung customer base. Ultimately, the longevity of the concept rests precisely in the continual dialogue within France—and now extended transnationally—about beliefs and practices and the relationship between food, drink and the rural, agrarian communities where these wines, cheeses (and more) are produced. It is the result of this on-going conversation that food and drink remains one of France’s most reliable pleasures, both at home and abroad.

Works Cited


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